

Hirschfield, author of *The Oklahoma Basic Intelligence Test*, has much fun with history from a Choctaw perspective and the anthropological study of Americans—whom the Choctaw deem Germans. Their perceptive misunderstandings of American history poke fun at the misunderstandings of tribal histories and cultures by German—American anthropologists. The novel is quick-paced (nearly manic at times), but it may frustrate some readers as none of its various plot lines are resolved; the hero is always off and running again before we can learn the final answer to any question the novel raises.

Blanca Schorcht. *Storyed Voices in Native American Texts: Harry Robinson, Thomas King, James Welch and Leslie Marmon Silko*. Indigenous People and Politics. New York: Routledge, 2003. 172 pp.

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As Arnold Krupat points out, the term “oral tradition” has become a “catchall phrase,” often expressing a “vague [. . .] nostalgia for some aboriginal authenticity” without reference to “historically and culturally specific instances” (38). In defining his term “anti-imperialist translation” to conceptualize parallels between Native American and more fully “post” colonial literatures, Krupat argues that to read a native text as “an instance of cultural translation,” one must demonstrate “how that text incorporates alternate strategies, indigenous perspectives, or language usages that [. . .] make its ‘English’ on the page a translation in which traces of [. . .] the ‘Indian’ can be discerned” (38). Blanca Schorcht’s study *Storyed Voices in Native American Texts* makes just this case for the traditional stories of Harry Robinson (recorded by anthropologist Wendy Wickwire) and three contemporary novels—Thomas King’s *Green Grass, Running Water* (1993), James Welch’s *Fools Crow* (1986), and Leslie Marmon Silko’s *Almanac of the Dead* (1991); using specific historical and cultural examples, Schorcht demonstrates with careful precision the perspectives and strategies that make these texts powerful examples of cultural translation. However, Schorcht chooses not to frame her study within postcolonial theory, agreeing with Thomas King that to do so

“assumes that the starting point for the discussion [of Native literature] is the advent of Europeans in North America” (qtd. in Schorcht 4). Schorcht argues that these three novels *resist* postcolonial readings; rather, they are rooted in oral storytelling traditions, and as oral story-telling cycles such as Harry Robinson’s have done since contact, translate European/American English into a “Native English” that redefines and recontextualizes non-native influences in terms of native worldviews.

*Storied Voices* originated as Schorcht’s 1999 doctoral dissertation at the University of British Columbia under the direction of Robin Ridington. Schorcht relies heavily on Ridington’s work and a wide range of other ethnographers and literary critics—including Julie Cruikshank, Dennis Tedlock, Jeannette Armstrong, Margery Fee, Gerald Vizenor, Hayden White, and the ubiquitous Bakhtin—to develop an interdisciplinary and border-crossing exploration of relationships between oral storytelling and written native literature. Her introduction, “Listening to Stories,” uses an analysis of Harry Robinson’s stories and conversations with Wendy Wickwire to build a theory of reading contemporary native literature cross-culturally as a continuation of an oral storytelling mode. Schorcht lays out the following questions, which systematically structure the book’s four chapters:

What happens to our reading when Native literatures are read from within the context of ongoing indigenous oral narrative traditions? What happens if we read those traditions as already inherently novelistic? How do orally told stories connect with the process of writing? How do traditional stories found in novels explicitly connect past and present as aspects of contemporary Native reality? And, finally, how do Native authors maintain the dialogic fluidity of oral storytelling performance in written forms like the novel? (4–5)

Challenging a tendency to equate language and culture, Schorcht demonstrates that Robinson, King, Welch, and Silko use a “Native English” that must be contextualized within native cultural narratives and conceptual categories to be read cross-culturally.

One of the significant contributions of this book is its introduc-

tion to the stories and commentaries of bilingual Okanagan storyteller Harry Robinson (1900–1990). Chapter 1, “Recreating the World Through Story,” examines Robinson’s ten-year collaboration with Wendy Wickwire, beginning in 1977, to record his stories, some of which were published in *Write It on Your Heart* (1989) and *Nature Power* (1992). According to Schorcht, these collections comprise the “first comprehensive body of traditional Native stories where the storyteller has provided his own translations,” as well as instructions on “how he wants us to think about Okanagan linguistic categories and cultural experience” (5, 3). Schorcht focuses on stories’ “continuity as social process” to demonstrate how Robinson theorizes his world and experience through narrative (34). She makes the case that Robinson’s story cycles are inherently novelistic, breaking down the opposition of oral and written narrative.

In the remainder of the book, Schorcht draws detailed connections between story cycles like Robinson’s and the three novels. Chapter 2, “Theorizing the World of the Novel,” takes up Thomas King’s *Green Grass, Running Water*, suggesting that the way King incorporates native storytelling traditions and reworks them in relation to “high literature” is directly influenced by Robinson. Schorcht shows how King also employs narrative as theory, bringing together Western and native theories in a dialogic interaction that translates Western canonical texts into the context of a Blackfeet Coyote creation story and a “coyote epistemology” (70).

In chapter 3, “Recovering the World: Western Fictions,” Schorcht examines how James Welch’s historical novel *Fools Crow* retells the Marias River Massacre from a Blackfeet point of view to explore relationships between history, story, and language, in the process recreating the Blackfeet world of the 1860s and “a Native phenomenology predicated on dreams and visions” (108).

Chapter 4, “Prophesying the World Through Story,” reads Silko’s *Almanac of the Dead* as a recreation of the Mayan *Popol Vuh*, a retelling of “the epic exploits of the Hero Twins as they journey through the Mayan Underworld of Xibalba” (109). In a richly detailed comparison of the novel with Mayan texts and cosmologies, Schorcht shows how the novel refuses categories such as story, history, and

prophecy, and the separation of past from present realities. A conclusion, "Emerging Stories," reiterates the main points of the study, argues for the necessity of reading self-reflexively across cultures (citing Greg Sarris), and adds an analysis of Schorcht's own reading process.

*Storied Voices in Native American Texts* is most valuable for its effective shift in perspective that foregrounds native theories and categories and attempts to build a culturally dialogic theory and practice of reading arising from the literature itself. Also very useful are Schorcht's detailed demonstrations of how culturally-specific oral narrative traditions work to structure these important novels formally and thematically. However, to my mind, Schorcht does not make her case that the novels resist postcolonial readings, and failing to consider their "anti-imperialist" aspects limits her study in a way that oversimplifies these complex novels. The book's most significant shortcoming is Schorcht's failure to contextualize her work in relationship to the work of U.S. critics similarly engaged in articulating indigenous-centered literary theories—such as Robert Warrior, Craig Womack, Kimberly Blaeser, Kimberly Ropolo—or to culturally dialogic critical models such as Krupat's ethnocriticism or James Ruppert's cultural mediation.

#### WORK CITED

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Bud Hirsch

We've heard the question, been asked it often by students and colleagues, in department meetings and casual conversation, have even raised it among ourselves: "What is Native American literature?" Is it determined by author ethnicity, subject matter, particular aesthetic

## Contributor Biographies

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ESTHER G. BELIN is a writer who was raised in Lynwood, California. She graduated from the University of California, Berkeley, and the Institute of American Indian Arts in Santa Fe, New Mexico. In 2000 she won the American Book Award for her first book of poetry, *From the Belly of My Beauty*, published by the University of Arizona Press in the fall of 1999. She has just finished her second book, *Home is Where the Flavor Is*. Belin was one of the cofounders for the Women of Color Film and Video Collective. As a student at the University of California, Berkeley, she produced five videos. Her first published work appeared in *Moving the Image: Independent Asian Pacific American Me-*